

# Seraphima Gurevich

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Chernovtsy

Ukraine

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## My family background

The family of my father Naum (Nuhim) Gurevich lived in Vilno [Vilna, Lithuania]. He was named after his father. It could have happened because his father, Nuhim Gurevich, died in 1902, three months before his son was born.

[Editor's note: Among Jews children can only be named after deceased relatives.] My paternal grandmother, Sima Gurevich, died six years after my grandfather. I don't know my father's sisters or brothers. The children were sent to different children's homes after their parents died. My father never saw his brothers and sisters and didn't know anything about them. He was sent to a children's home when he was 6. There was no information about his parents, brothers and sisters in the documents that were kept at the children's home. He told us very little about this children's home. I only know that it was located in Vilno. There were Jewish, Lithuanian, Latvian and Russian children in it. My father studied at elementary school there. He learned Russian and arithmetic there.

My father was enthusiastic about the Revolution of 1917 [1](#). In 1920 he volunteered to join the Red Army. My father was wounded at the front somewhere in Russia. My father was wounded at the front during the civil war. After he recovered, his commander sent him to the School of Red Commanders. After finishing school my father became a professional military. He moved from one military unit to another.

My mother's family lived in the village of Polonnaye in Kamenets-Podolsk district, in Vinnitsa province. My maternal grandfather, Gersh Zastavkis, was born in Polonnaye in the 1860s. He was a cabman. He had a cart and two horses which he kept in a small stable behind his house. My grandfather worked very hard, but the family was still very poor. My grandmother Sylka was younger than my grandfather. She was born in Polonnaye in the early 1870s. I don't know her maiden name. My maternal grandmother was a housewife. My grandparents had 11 children. They also adopted 2 children of my grandmother's brother. The boys in the family studied in cheder and



the girls had a teacher teaching them at home. All the children finished the eight-grade lower secondary school in Polonnoye. I knew many of my mother's sisters and brothers. They were a very close family. There was a typical atmosphere of a Jewish family in their house, full of love and warmth. My mother's family was a model of generosity, care and love for me.

I remember my grandparents' house. It was a long brick house. There was a hallway, 4 rooms and a kitchen with a big stove. They fetched water from the well in the yard. There was a small flower garden in front of the house. They didn't have an orchard or a vegetable garden. They had a stable and a hen-house behind the house. My grandmother also kept a goat for milk for the children.

My grandmother leased one room in the house to families of the military or students. She cooked for her tenants, of course, they got kosher food as well, but I think they liked it. The rent that my grandparents received constituted a significant part of the family budget. My grandmother made bread. She made dough in a big bowl and baked bread to last for a week. She stored the bread in a cupboard covered with cotton cloth. The bread remained fresh even by the end of the week. They were a poor family, but my grandmother kept the house very clean. There were snow-white lace curtains on the windows. They had only the most necessary furniture, but there were many books in Hebrew and Yiddish, both religious and secular. Regardless of their poverty they were cheerful and happy.

There were many Jews in Polonnoye. There were also many Ukrainians. There were no national conflicts in the village. They got along well with their Ukrainian neighbors. The Ukrainians spoke fluent Yiddish and the Jews could speak Ukrainian. They spoke Yiddish in my mother's family, but my grandmother and her children also spoke fluent Ukrainian and Russian.

There were pogroms in Polonnoye before the Revolution. My mother told me that her family had to hide in the cellar of their Ukrainian neighbors many times. Fortunately, all members of the family survived.

My mother's parents were religious. There were several synagogues in the town. I don't know exactly how many. There was a synagogue near my grandparents' house. They went to synagogue on Saturday and on holidays. They celebrated Sabbath and Jewish holidays, followed the laws of kashruts and observed all the Jewish traditions. I give credit to my grandmother Sylka for the religiosity of the family and for the warm atmosphere in the house. My grandmother managed to make a festive dinner on Sabbath and on Jewish holidays. She made delicious Jewish food.

At Pesach my grandmother took her chickens to the shochet to have them slaughtered, and then she made chicken broth. It was supposed to simmer in the pot until it became gold in color and clear, then it was ready. erMy grandmother added dumplings made from matzah flour into this clear soup. She made chicken necks stuffed with fried flour and liver, delicious stuffed fish, baked strudels with jam and nuts, and sponge cakes from matzah flour. My grandmother always did a general cleaning of the house before Pesach. They kept their Pesach dishes in the attic. The whole family got together at the table on Pesach. My grandmother lit candles and my grandfather recited a prayer. During and after the meal they all sang traditional songs. Later when the children were living separately they got together in their parents' house.

My grandmother was educated at home. She was a smart and intelligent woman and she read a lot. She could read Hebrew and Yiddish. I remember her reading in the evening, wearing her funny

round glasses. She read religious books and fiction; they had lots of books at home. They had books by Jewish writers, like Sholem Aleichem, for example, in Hebrew and Yiddish. <sup>2</sup> My grandmother read books on philosophy and contemporary writers. She loved poetry. She sometimes cried while reading poems. I got nervous, but my grandmother calmed me down saying that she was crying out of joy and that tears of joy were light tears. All I know about the Jewish way of life is what my grandmother told me.

My grandmother was a very nice and kind woman. Besides taking care of her 13 children she helped the poor. On Fridays and Saturdays she provided meals to the poor people who came to her house. She always had food and a kind word for them.

She wore old-fashioned clothes: long skirts and dark blouses. She didn't wear a wig. She wore a white kerchief at home and a dark shawl when going out. It was a silk or a woolen shawl, depending on the weather.

I don't know when my mother's brothers and sisters were born. I only know which of them were younger or older than my mother. Some of them died in infancy. David was the oldest boy in the family. My mother told me that he was a very smart, but sickly boy. He was the only one in the family to receive religious education and to finish an eight-grade Russian grammar school. David could read and write in Hebrew. Many Jewish families in Polonnoye used to send their children to David to learn Hebrew. David married Sheva, a Jewish girl, when he was very young, about 17 years old. Sheva was a very smart woman. She had graduated from a pharmaceutical school and worked as a pharmacist. David felt oppressed by poverty and he left for Palestine with his wife's family before the Revolution of 1917. He felt very homesick there. We didn't correspond with him at that time. It was not advisable to have contacts with Palestine. [Editor's note: The authorities could arrest an individual corresponding with relatives abroad, charge him with espionage, and send him to a concentration camp or even sentence him to death.]

We resumed our correspondence in the 1980s. Our neighbors in Chernovtsy corresponded with their children in Israel. They helped us to find David. He sent us a picture of his daughter. He had two children. His son works at a radio. His daughter was a teacher and had 3 children. That's all I know about them.

My mother's brother Mikhail - his Jewish name was Moshe - lived in Leningrad. He left there when he was young to find work and support his family and his younger brothers and sisters. He became a locksmith's apprentice at the machine building plant and later studied at the Rabfak <sup>3</sup> Later Mikhail worked as a foreman and then a shop supervisor at this plant. During the war the plant was evacuated to the Ural and Mikhail went there, too. The plant manufactured tank engines. Mikhail was married. His wife's name was Lisa. They had two daughters: Mina and Ania. Mikhail died in Leningrad in 1978.

My mother's sister, Riva, was the third child in the family. She was educated at home and finished lower secondary school in Polonnoye. Later, Riva married a Polish Jew. After World War I a part of Poland was given to Russia, including the town of Shepetovka where Riva's husband lived. They had a son. Riva's husband was a very nice, hardworking man. In 1936 he was arrested on charges of espionage and executed. Riva and her son were exiled to Zhmerinka. Riva finished a course in accounting. Her son graduated from the Military Medical Academy in Kiev and got a job. During the war Riva was in the Jewish ghetto in Zhmerinka. After the war she lived and worked in Zhmerinka.

When she retired she went to live with her son in Kiev. She died in Kiev in the late 1970s.

My mother Elizabeth (Lisa) was born in 1903. The next child in the family was Yankel. He finished lower secondary school in Polonnoye. Yankel was influenced by revolutionary ideas. After the Revolution of 1917 he became a Komsomol [4](#) activist. He moved to Leningrad and became a party official. He was married. His wife's name was Clara. They had a daughter. Her name was Elizabeth, but the family called her Lialia. During the war Clara and Lialia were in the blockade of Leningrad [5](#). In 1943 when the blockade was broken, they were taken to Moscow and then to Tashkent. Yankel was fighting on the front. He was wounded several times, but he returned to the army after every recovery. After the war the family returned to Leningrad. Yankel worked as an engineer at the plant. He died in the 1980s.

The next child in my mother's family was Bronia. She was a very sickly child. She married a young Jew from Polonnoye and was a housewife. Her son Leonid studied and lived in Kiev. During the war Bronia, her husband and son were evacuated to Kazakhstan with us. Her husband was not subject to recruitment due to his poor health. He died of a chronic disease a few years after the war. Bronia lived in Kiev with her son. She died in 1986.

Hana was my grandparents' last child. She also married a young Jew from Polonnoye. They had a son. During the war she was in evacuation in Siberia with her son. Her husband died shortly after the war. After the war Hana lived in Zhmerinka with Riva and later she moved to her son in Kiev. Hana remarried in the 1970s and moved to her husband's home in the Crimea. She died in the Crimea in 1998.

The rest of my mother's brothers and sisters died in infancy. My mother's brothers and sisters always supported and helped each other. Regretfully, they gave up Jewish traditions after they left their parents' house.

## Growing up

My mother lived in Polonnoye helping my grandmother. In 1925 she met my father who was serving in the military unit deployed there. My mother was a very pretty girl. I don't know details about how they met. They soon got married. They had a civil ceremony. My father was a professional military man and a traditional Jewish wedding was out of the question. I was born in 1926. I was named Seraphima (Sima) after my deceased grandmother, my father's mother. I was the only child in the family. My parents moved from one town to another and they decided to have no more children. My mother was a housewife.

Soon after I was born we moved to another location where my father got a job assignment. I spent my childhood in the military residential camps in Shepetovka and Korosten. We lived in the barracks, which had many small rooms where the officers' families resided. There was a common toilet and kitchen with a few primus stoves. The majority of soldiers and officers were Russian. Our surroundings didn't allow a traditional Jewish way of life. When I grew up, my mother told me about her childhood and life in Polonnoye and about the Jewish traditions in their family. We all believed that her parents were retrogrades to observe all this religious 'nonsense'. We thought that religiosity was a vestige of the past. My mother was a typical Soviet woman and she didn't feel upset about not observing any Jewish traditions. We spoke Russian in our family and I had Russian friends. My parents switched to Yiddish when they wanted to conceal the subject of their discussion

from me.

In 1932 there was a big famine in Ukraine. [6](#) I saw starving, exhausted people. But since my father was a military, our family received good provisions. In 1933 my father got a job assignment in Kiev. We lived in an apartment in the center of the city. I went to the Russian secondary school in Kiev when I turned 8. I studied well. I was an industrious girl. I became a Young Octobrist [7](#), then a pioneer and a Komsomol member.

I wasn't an activist, but joining such organizations was a general procedure, and I followed it. It never occurred to me, for example, that there was another option other than becoming a Komsomol member. We celebrated Soviet holidays at home and at school: the 1st of May and the 7th of November. All schoolchildren went to the parades and afterwards there was a concert of amateur performers at school. My mother gave a party at our home. My father's colleagues came to celebrate holidays. I remember that at such celebrations at our home the first toast was always for the health and long life of the father of all the people, Stalin.

There were no discussions about the events of 1933 in Germany. [Editor's note: Seraphima is referring to Hitler's rise to power.] It was all happening far away and was no threat to our country. This was a common belief here.

The arrests during the so-called Great Terror [8](#) didn't touch our family too closely. Unfortunately, the husband of my mother's sister Riva was killed. In 1938 my father was transferred to Voronezh, a town located in central Russia, about 700 km from Kiev. He served in the railroad military unit. We moved with him and settled down in a two-room apartment in a big 4- story building in the center of Voronezh. I went to school there. We got used to moving from one place to another and this move didn't disturb us at all.

I spent every summer vacation with my grandmother Sylka in Polonnoye. I played with the local children and my cousins that also spent the summer with our grandmother. I got used to the Jewish way of life when I stayed with my grandmother. She didn't force any religious ideas or dogmas on us. She understood that I was being raised as an atheist. She told me quietly about Jewish history and traditions. She used to pray quietly and light candles, but I took little interest in that. I got used to Yiddish and began to speak it a little. I loved my grandmother dearly. She was a very kind, nice, beautiful and wise woman. I loved everything about and around her. Everything that was Jewish became close and very dear to me thanks to my grandmother. During my stay in Polonnoye I heard Sholem Aleichem's stories, which my grandmother read to me, translating them from Yiddish into Russian. Since then Sholem Aleichem became one of my favorite writers. My grandmother told me Biblical stories and stories from the history of the Jewish people. My grandfather didn't work in those years. He played with us and read to us. He was always busy doing things about the house. Before meals he retreated to his room (I understand now that he went there to pray), then he sat at the table to have a meal with his family. On Saturday he and my grandmother had a rest and spent time with the children reading to them and playing with them.

## During the war

In 1939 Germany attacked Poland. The Soviet army was also involved in this war. My father was supposed to know about the situation in depth. But he was not worried. I wonder whether it occurred to him that our country might become involved in the war, too. But at that time we were

not aware of many things and the events in Poland didn't alarm us. Besides, we believed in the strength of the Soviet Union. We were sure that nobody would dare to attack our country, and if somebody did, the war would be over in few days with our victory.

In the summer of 1941 I finished the 9th grade. I had the highest marks in all subjects and my parents decided to send me to the best pioneer camp in the country, Artek in the Crimea. I spent only one week there. On the afternoon of 22nd June 1941 we heard the artillery cannonade. Our teachers knew about the beginning of the war but they were not telling the children about it. They didn't get any instructions and were confused about what to do. On the following day the children were to evacuate from the camp. There were quite a few children from Voronezh in the camp, and a representative of the Voronezh Military Division came to take these children home. Our train was bombed on the way to Voronezh. Air raids in Voronezh began about a week after I came there. When an air raid began, we ran to hide in the basement of our building, which was transformed into an air raid shelter.

My grandmother from Polonnoye joined us in Voronezh. She came with her neighbors who were evacuating from Polonnoye via Voronezh. My grandfather Gersh refused to go with her. He loved his house and his horses and couldn't leave them. Besides, he had known Germans during World War I and believed them to be civilized people. He tried to convince my grandmother that the Germans were going to struggle only against the communists. But my grandmother wanted to be with her children and grandchildren. My mother's sister Bronia, her husband and son also came to us in Voronezh. Then one of my first cousins, the son of my mother's sister Riva, also joined us and all of us were evacuated together.

My father was the head of the South-Eastern Railroad Human Resources Department. I guess it was due to him that we went to the evacuation in a rather comfortable train, while the majority of people were going in railcars used for cattle transport. My father was not subject to recruitment into the army; he was a railroad man, and railroad men had to provide for the continuous operation of the railroads. However, my father went to the military recruitment office every day, insisting that they send him to the front. Shortly after we left, my father volunteered to the front. He became a battalion commissar.

Our trip was very difficult. Our only encouragement was that we were all together and that we could help each other. We received meals on the way as the family of a railroad military man.

We reached Kazarinsk station [in Middle Asia about 3,000 km from Kiev] and found accommodation in one room of a house. There were 7 of us. The owners of the house sympathized with us. We received some food on ration cards issued by military registration offices, but this was not sufficient. We were starving. All the people were starving at that time; so, we didn't find ourselves experiencing something extraordinary. News from the front left us bereft of hope for a prompt victory.

I entered the 10th grade at the local school in Kazarinsk. The majority of pupils were evacuated children, and there were not so many local children there. There were a few Jewish children in the class. I had a few Jewish friends. The local population was friendly and sympathetic. I remember one local girl bringing potato pies to school to give to the children that were in the evacuation. Her mother had made them for these hungry children.



I studied very successfully. I finished school in Kazarinsk. In 1942 the Germans retreated from Voronezh and we were allowed to go home. We returned to our apartment in Voronezh. We hadn't heard from my father for a long time. We didn't know whether he was alive or not. We didn't stay long in Voronezh. At the beginning of 1943 the Germans began to attack again and we had to evacuate yet again. We went to Kazakhstan. This time we went in railcars used for the transportation of cattle. The train was bombed many times; we didn't have enough food and were traveling in unsanitary conditions. Using the toilet and washing were only possible when the train stopped, and then there was always the risk of missing the train.

On the way, one of several little miracles occurred. At a small station where the train stopped a military hospital boarded. My mother always asked people from the front whether they had seen my father. Some patients who were walking near the train told us that my father was on this train. He had been severely wounded at the front. He had had his leg amputated. This hospital train was headed for Alma-Ata and we were allowed to go with them.

We got accommodation in one room, all 7 of us. My father was taken to hospital. The conditions in the hospital were terrible: there was shortage of medical personnel, medications and food. The doctors were happy when relatives came to take care of their patients, because they also helped the other patients. My mother stayed beside my father all the time. My grandmother and Bronia cooked for him. My father had had his leg amputated up to his knee on the sanitary train. In the hospital in Alma-Ata gangrene began in his stump and he had to have his leg amputated up to his hip. He had to walk with crutches for the rest of his life. If it hadn't been for my mother taking care of him he wouldn't have survived. He had sepsis after surgery and we didn't know whether he would survive. Another miracle was that my father survived. We received food coupons as the family of a war invalid, but we could get very little food for them. My mother did some work in this hospital to earn some money.

In 1944 I entered the Medical Institute in Alma-Ata. There was no anti-Semitism at that time. I passed my entrance exams without problems and was admitted. My father was a war veteran, an invalid, and had many awards. I finished two years at the Institute before we left Alma-Ata.

Vinnitsa was liberated in 1944. My grandmother wrote my grandfather in Polonnoye. She was planning to go home. She received a response from their neighbors in Polonnoye. They wrote that their Ukrainian neighbors had been hiding my grandfather in Polonnoye for two years during the occupation. In 1943 somebody betrayed them to the Germans. The Germans shot the Ukrainian family for hiding a Jew and threw my grandfather under a train. This was a terrible thing to hear. Of course, we read in the newspapers and heard on the radio about what the Germans were doing in the occupied areas, but the tragedies were still something distant. This time the tragedy affected our family. My grandmother blamed herself for leaving her husband. My grandmother lived with us for the rest of her life. We were her family.

## Post-war

In 1946 my father got better. Our house in Voronezh had been destroyed, so we decided to reevacuate to the west. We decided to go to Kishinev because of the warm climate and plentiful fruit. But when we saw all the destructions ruins in Kishinev, we and decided to go to Chernovtsy instead. We were told that Chernovtsy remained almost intact. It was a cultured European town. There was a university and theaters there. Chernovtsy belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

until 1918. In November 1918 Bukovina became a part of Romania. Chernovtsy used to be a Jewish town. After the Romanians came to power some Jews left Chernovtsy. But even then the Jews constituted over 60% of the population. There were about 65,000 Jews out of 105,000 people living in Chernovtsy. Jews had great opportunities there. They were allowed to build big stone houses in the center of the town. Jews investing money in the development of industries or culture were exempted from paying taxes for 20 years. Yiddish was spoken in the streets as often as German or Romanian.

My father received an apartment on the 4th floor of a building. But there was a problem. It was difficult for my father to go up the stairs, especially since it had a spiral staircase. My father went to the military commander of the town with his request to give him another apartment. The commander ordered the residential authorities to allow my father a choice of apartments. My father chose a 3-room apartment on the 2nd floor. We were happy to move into this apartment, although at first we were afraid that its former owners would come back. I liked this apartment very much. We had a stove for heating, and gas was installed in the 1960s. There was a stove in each room. My favorite was the one in my grandmother's room. It had brown tiles and a seat. It was very nice to sit there on winter evenings reading a book. My grandmother liked this stove, too. My mother's brothers and sisters often invited my grandmother to move in with them, but my grandmother always replied: 'I will, if Sima and my stove move with me'. In 1948 my grandmother fell ill and stayed in bed until her death.

In 1946 I continued my studies at Chernovtsy Medical Institute. There were quite a few Jewish students and lecturers at our institute. The majority of the population in Chernovtsy was Jewish. Many people spoke Yiddish and it was a novelty to me to hear Yiddish in the streets. There was a Jewish atmosphere in Chernovtsy. I had lived in many towns, but this was the first town where people were intelligent, polite and friendly. It was amazing. Regretfully, this aura of kindness diminished along with the number of Jews left in Chernovtsy. There was a Jewish school in the town and a Jewish theater. There was also a synagogue.

In 1948 the campaign against 'cosmopolitans' [9](#). It was also felt in Chernovtsy. Many lecturers at higher educational institutions lost their jobs. Anti-Semitism was forced artificially into the society. The Jewish school and theater were closed at that time. The Jewish anti-fascist committee in Moscow was closed and its members were arrested. Jewish writers were not published. I was particularly sorry that they stopped publishing works by Ilya Erenburg [10](#). I was fond of his books and articles, especially his article about Babi Yar [11](#). The stronger the anti-Semitism was, the more I felt I was a Jew.

We were all happy that Israel was established. My father said that the most precious dream of many generations of Jews had come true. They finally got their own country after centuries of knocking around the world. We couldn't even dream of leaving the USSR. My parents were very ill and the authorities didn't allow anybody to leave the country legally, and we couldn't move illegally.

I graduated from the Medical Institute in 1948. I got a job assignment in the village of Storozhenets in Chernovtsy region. The village is located not far from Chernovtsy, approximately 30 kilometers away. I came home on weekends. I faced anti-Semitism in Storozhenets. These were incidents in the streets, but nothing of this kind happened at work. Anti-Semitism became more acute in 1953



during the Doctors' Plot. [12](#) In 1949 I returned to Chernovtsy and got a job as a physician at a polyclinic.

Our neighbors in Chernovtsy liked me a lot. Many of them did their best to introduce me to the young men they knew, their relatives and friends. Once I came home for a weekend and our neighbor came to see me. She was with a young man. It was Isaac Tomengauzer, my future husband. We got married in 1949. We had a civil ceremony and my mother prepared a dinner for our family and closest friends.

### **My husband**

My husband was born in Mohilev-Podolsk in 1927. His father's name was Israel and his mother's name was Rachel. Isaac studied well at school. He completed 8 years of secondary school before the war. During World War II the Germans occupied Mohilev-Podolsk very quickly. My husband's family, his parents, his younger sister Tusia, then a 5-year-old girl, and he were in ghetto in Transnistria [13](#). Isaac's mother went insane from the horrors of the ghetto. She became a violent lunatic and was dangerous to the community. I don't know the details of her death. My husband was reluctant to discuss this subject. I know that she was poisoned. I don't know whether she was poisoned by the Romanians or by inmates of the ghetto. Shortly after this event, Isaac arranged an escape from the ghetto, taking his father and sister with him. They were captured. The Romanians were not as violent as Germans. They didn't kill them. They beat them and returned them to the ghetto. Some time afterwards there came a rumor that a German punitive unit was coming to the ghetto to do away with its inmates. Isaac stole a Romanian truck and rescued his father and sister and 7 other inmates of the ghetto. A few days later the punitive unit came to the ghetto and exterminated all its inmates.

Isaac, his father and his sister returned home to Mohilev-Podolsk. It was under Romanian occupation, too. Isaac's father was drafted into forced labor. Isaac went to work instead of his father. He registered himself on the lists and went home. Once, he was captured. The Romanians kept him under arrest in a cell for a long time and then sent him to Bucharest. I don't know why they did that. There, he was under the guardianship of the local synagogue. He did some work at the synagogue and received meals and clothes for doing this work. The synagogue was looking for Jews who needed help and made every effort to make their life more tolerable. If possible they tried to exchange Jews for food and valuables.

When the Soviet army liberated Bucharest in November 1944 Isaac went home. His father had remarried by that time. His 2nd wife Mara was a Jewish woman. Isaac was very unhappy about his father marrying another woman and left for Chernovtsy. He spent his first night there on a staircase and the next morning he went to the Construction College. He was admitted there. He lived in the hostel. He attended classes during the day and worked as a loader at night. He was very successful with his studies and was trade union leader at college. He received a food package as a former inmate of the ghetto. He sent all this food to his father and sister in Mohilev-Podolsk. Isaac finished college with honors and received a recommendation to the Institute [higher educational institute]. He could be admitted without exams, but he had to refuse. He had to go to work. He was appointed chief engineer of a brick factory.

Later, my husband studied by correspondence course at the Faculty of Construction Technologies at /Lvov Construction Engineering Institute. Upon graduation he became director of the brick

factory. Later he became chief economist of the regional construction department. Isaac was a party member. At 25 he became party leader of the Regional Construction Enterprises Association. He conducted meetings and spoke for the Soviet authorities. He also took part in the organization of celebrations for the Soviet holidays. He was the only Jew that was a party leader in town. There were several thousand people under his supervision.

The situation for Jews was already difficult. People wrote anonymous derogatory letters to the town committee of the Party. In one of these letters he was even called 'chief Zionist of the Soviet Union.' His colleagues respected him very much for his integrity and honesty, and they stood up for him. He worked in the construction industry for 50 years. He retired at the age of 65. Shortly afterwards in 1993 he suffered a myocardial infarction and then a stroke. He recovered, but in 1995 he had another infarction and died. The Jewish cemetery had been closed by then. I buried my husband at the municipal cemetery.

My husband and I raised his younger sister. After finishing school she entered the Dental College in Odessa. We supported her. Upon finishing college Tusia got a job and married a Jew from Odessa. We gave them money to buy an apartment. They had a lovely daughter. In the early 1970s Tusia and her family moved to Israel. Tusia supports me now. She calls me and sends money sometimes.

In 1953 the case of the Kremlin doctors [the Doctors' Plot] began. I was a doctor at the polyclinic and faced acute anti-Semitism. It helped a lot that there were quite a few Jewish doctors and patients. We supported each other. We did our best at work and shared our experiences. We got fewer patients, but there were still people that didn't believe the official propaganda and came to be our patients. Stalin died in 1953. I grieved along with all the Soviet people. We were convinced that anti-Semitism and other crimes were not Stalin's fault and that he didn't know anything about the actual situation in the country. We couldn't imagine our life without him. We were brought up in this way. Some of our acquaintances had been to Stalin's camps. They were sincerely happy when he died. It seemed a blasphemy to me at that time. Later I came to a different understanding of many things. What I heard after the Twentieth Party Congress [14](#) shocked me. At first I thought it was a mistake and Stalin couldn't have been blamed for all those horrors that Khrushchev [15](#) talked about at the Congress. It took me quite some time to accept this knowledge of the true state of things.

After the war my grandmother lived with us, and it was she who introduced Jewish traditions into our family. We celebrated Soviet holidays as it was a tradition in our family, but we also began to celebrate Jewish holidays. At first we did this for the sake of my grandmother. It was difficult for her to go shopping or to cook, so my mother and I did these chores. We did the shopping and cooking under the supervision of my grandmother. We didn't have the opportunity to follow the rules of kashrut, but we didn't eat pork and tried to keep meat and dairy products separate. In 1948 the synagogue in Chernovtsy was closed. There was a bakery in town where they secretly made matzah before Pesach. We went there late in the evening bringing flour, and picked up the matzah the following morning. It was like in a detective story: we had to knock on the door in a certain way, say a password, and then the door was open. The Soviet authorities would have closed the bakery and arrested its owner if they had found out that they were baking matzah. There were also Jewish drivers who delivered matzah to homes. We usually ordered a lot of matzah to share with the poor and old people who couldn't go through this whole process themselves. Only in the 1990s was the synagogue open again.

My grandmother taught me to cook stuffed fish. It is probably one of the most complicated dishes of Jewish cuisine. I can also cook other traditional foods. We also celebrated the Sabbath in our family. We put a white tablecloth on the table and my grandmother lit two candles. We often had family reunions at Pesach. My mother's brothers and sisters and their families came from other towns. My grandmother conducted the seder. She was the only one who remembered how to do it. My grandmother was very happy to see the family all together.

My grandmother died in 1955. She was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Chernovtsy, according to the Jewish tradition. There is granite tree on her grave, as required by Jewish tradition. [Editor's note: According to Jewish tradition, a granite tree is installed on a grave to symbolize the continuation of life and the immortality of the kin.]

My father developed a psychosis because of all he had lived through. He had become a party member at the front in 1919 during the Civil War [16](#). He had never been an activist, but he was very proud to be a communist. When his mental condition deteriorated, he thought that people were coming to take away his party membership card. It was the most valuable and sacred thing that he possessed. He couldn't sleep at night, and wouldn't allow us to open the door if somebody rang the doorbell. He was completely exhausted, and we had to put him in a mental hospital. He recovered and even worked as a public assessor in court. But later his condition grew worse again. He tried to commit suicide, and I had to take him to the mental hospital again. ? After hHe had a myocardial infarction there, he died in 1987. He was buried in the town cemetery. He was a convinced communist and had many Soviet awards, and we didn't bury him according to Jewish tradition.

After my grandmother died my mother continued to make sure that Jewish traditions were observed in our family. There was a very religious woman living in the same building where we lived. Later she moved to Israel. She used to come to my mother; they would put on their shawls, open my grandmother's prayer book and read prayers. Later this woman moved to Israel. They followed all the Jewish traditions. They remembered the deceased of their family - my mother knew this tradition from her childhood. I have given my grandmother's prayer book to the Jewish museum in Heosed.

## **My son Roman**

My husband and I lived with my parents because we didn't have a dwelling of our own. Besides, we couldn't leave our parents, due to their illnesses. I didn't have children for a long time. My family was very worried about it. They loved me a lot and wished me the best. In 1955 I finally gave birth to a son. We named him Roman, in memory of my husband's mother Rachel, his name begins with the letter R, like hers. My son was a very sickly boy. We gave him a lot of care and attention.

I continued to work after my son was born. My mother helped me with the housekeeping. I had to read and study a lot to be a good doctor. I came home late from work. I had to visit patients at home and spend more time with them after my duties. There were lines of patients at the clinic. I worked hard. When I came home, people called me to ask for medical advice. When my son's teacher asked him how we spent our evenings, he replied that his mother sits in the kitchen filling in her patients' record books. I believed that I had to give all my time to other people. Now I understand that I ought to have spent more time with my son.

Roman was a good pupil and finished school very well. After school he wanted to study at the University of Chernovtsy. At that time I was director of the University Polyclinic. I knew many officials and had connections with the admission commission. My son was not admitted, despite his good knowledge and my connections. It was 1972, when it was almost impossible for a Jew to enter a higher educational institution. Roman went to work at the factory where his father was working. He studied with a private teacher and the following year he entered the Faculty of Economics at the Moscow University of Oil and Gas. He lived in the hostel in Moscow. He came home on vacations. Upon graduation in 1978, he returned to Chernovtsy and got a job at the machine building plant.

When Jews began to move to Israel, I sympathized with them. But I didn't consider emigration myself. I grew up in this country and I loved it. My friends were here, whereas in Israel I only had Tusia, my husband's sister. I couldn't even think about having to change my life. I was very happy to hear from my acquaintances who had left that they had a good life in Israel. Besides, the situation was not so bad for Jews in Chernovtsy. I cannot even imagine our town without Jews. Chernovtsy is our favorite town. Now that I've grown older I'm bound to stay here, where my relatives' graves are.

When my son returned home, quite a few Jewish girls were seeking his attention. I was hoping that my daughter-in-law would be like a daughter to me and a close person; I wanted my son to have a Jewish family with Jewish traditions. I wished that my daughter-in-law were a Jew, to be at least the same nationality as he. I couldn't understand then that my son didn't have the foundations that I had. What was most important, he didn't have respect towards the wishes of older people. I couldn't imagine that my son would get married without having his parents' consent. I grew up in a traditional Jewish family based on respect to one's parents. That was how we were trying to raise our son. His classmates even teased him because he never left home before his grandmother blessed him. He waited for his grandmother's blessing before going to take exams. So, I couldn't understand why he avoided meeting girls. One day he told me that he had a woman and that she was having a baby. They didn't get married. She was 7 years older than my son and she was Ukrainian, to crown it all. Her name was Galina Grazhdan. This news was a shock for me. Their daughter Victoria was born in 1977. It was a nightmare for me. A year later, their son Julian was born. In the course of time my attitude towards this woman changed. Galina was an engineer and she turned out to be a very good mother. My son didn't live with them, but he paid allowances for the children. Galina didn't want me to see their children. I didn't try to see them against her will. I saw them in the street sometimes, but they pretended they didn't see me, and so did I. Sometimes I prepared a little parcel for them, went to their building, and asked a boy to take it to the children. I tried to do what I could for them. But I still hoped that my son would meet a Jewish woman.

When my son went to the Baltic Sea on a vacation, he met a Russian woman there, two years older than he. He fell in love with her. I met with her, and asked her to talk with her parents before she decided to marry a Jewish man with two children. Some time later, she called to tell me that her parents had given their consent. My husband and I went to Daugava where this girl, Tatiana Tushyna, lived. We met with her parents to make arrangements for the wedding. Roman stayed in Daugava with his wife. Their lovely daughter Lidia was born in 1990. My son used to bring his family on vacations to visit us every year. I also visited them there. Traveling became difficult after the fall of the Soviet Union. We need foreign passports and visas to travel there. Besides, I can't

afford to travel that far any more. The trip is very expensive. We correspond and call each other every now and then.

When my granddaughter Victoria (Galina's daughter) turned 15 she decided to go abroad. Galina addressed me, asking me to help them. Galina and Victoria came to see me. Victoria was a very beautiful girl. She studied successfully at school, painted and played the piano. I went with her to submit documents for her studies in Israel. Victoria passed all the tests successfully and was admitted. I wanted to support my granddaughter. Before her departure to Israel I wrote a letter to my husband's sister Tusia asking her to help her brother's granddaughter. Tusia supported Victoria during her studies. Victoria stayed in Israel. When Victoria was still at school, Galina was diagnosed with cancer, and it was too late for surgery. I stayed with Galina until she died. My son came to her funeral. Julian stayed with me and my son often visited and supported us. He became very close to Julian. Julian decided to join his sister. He followed in Victoria's footsteps and went to study in Israel. My son took him there, and found a family to take him under their guardianship. I was very happy that my son became close with his children. Julian is in a tank unit in the army now.

My mother suffered a lot before she died. She became blind after my husband died. I made every effort to take good care of her. She died in 1995. I buried her according to Jewish tradition in the Jewish cemetery.

My son and daughter-in-law want me to move in with them, but I can't. Firstly, I shall not receive a pension in Latvia according to the law. Besides, I will be alone there. I know many people who love and respect me in Chernovtsy. I wouldn't be able to live in a different surrounding.

Over the past 10 years the Jewish way of life has revived in Chernovtsy. There are many Jewish organizations, including Hesed. There is a big library in Hesed where I read a lot. We celebrate Sabbath and Jewish holidays in Hesed. I quit my job, but now I work as a doctor in Hesed to help needy and poor people. I have another responsibility in Hesed. Quite a few people who emigrated asked me to look after the graves of their relatives. I have assistants and we keep these graves in order. But my main duty is to take care of the old people. I try to provide good medical services to my patients. They need me and I need them. I am happy to be able to help people, and I thank God for this gift.

## Glossary

### **1 Russian Revolution of 1917**

Revolution in which the tsarist regime was overthrown in the Russian Empire and, under Lenin, was replaced by the Bolshevik rule. The two phases of the Revolution were: February Revolution, which came about due to food and fuel shortages during WWI, and during which the tsar abdicated and a provisional government took over. The second phase took place in the form of a coup led by Lenin in October/November (October Revolution) and saw the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks.

### **2 Sholem Aleichem (pen name of Shalom Rabinovich (1859-1916))**

Yiddish author and humorist, a prolific writer of novels, stories, feuilletons, critical reviews, and poem in Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian. He also contributed regularly to Yiddish dailies and weeklies. In his writings he described the life of Jews in Russia, creating a gallery of bright characters. His

creative work is an alloy of humor and lyricism, accurate psychological and details of everyday life. He founded a literary Yiddish annual called Di Yidishe Folksbibliotek (The Popular Jewish Library), with which he wanted to raise the despised Yiddish literature from its mean status and at the same time to fight authors of trash literature, who dragged Yiddish literature to the lowest popular level. The first volume was a turning point in the history of modern Yiddish literature. Sholem Aleichem died in New York in 1916. His popularity increased beyond the Yiddish-speaking public after his death. Some of his writings have been translated into most European languages and his plays and dramatic versions of his stories have been performed in many countries. The dramatic version of Tevye the Dairyman became an international hit as a musical (Fiddler on the Roof) in the 1960s.

### **3 Rabfak**

Educational institutions for young people without secondary education, specifically established by the Soviet power.

### **4 Komsomol**

Communist youth political organization created in 1918. The task of the Komsomol was to spread of the ideas of communism and involve the worker and peasant youth in building the Soviet Union. The Komsomol also aimed at giving a communist upbringing by involving the worker youth in the political struggle, supplemented by theoretical education. The Komsomol was more popular than the Communist Party because with its aim of education people could accept uninitiated young proletarians, whereas party members had to have at least a minimal political qualification.

### **5 Blockade of Leningrad**

On September 8, 1941 the Germans fully encircled Leningrad and its siege began. It lasted until January 27, 1944. The blockade meant incredible hardships and privations for the population of the town. Hundreds of thousands died from hunger, cold and diseases during the almost 900 days of the blockade.

### **6 Famine in Ukraine**

In 1920 a deliberate famine was introduced in the Ukraine causing the death of millions of people. It was arranged in order to suppress those protesting peasants who did not want to join the collective farms. There was another dreadful deliberate famine in 1930-1934 in the Ukraine. The authorities took away the last food products from the peasants. People were dying in the streets, whole villages became deserted. The authorities arranged this specifically to suppress the rebellious peasants who did not want to accept Soviet power and join collective farms.

### **7 Young Octobrist**

In Russian Oktyabrenok, or 'pre-pioneer', designates Soviet children of seven years or over preparing for entry into the pioneer organization.

### **8 Great Terror (1934-1938)**

During the Great Terror, or Great Purges, which included the notorious show trials of Stalin's former



Bolshevik opponents in 1936-1938 and reached its peak in 1937 and 1938, millions of innocent Soviet citizens were sent off to labor camps or killed in prison. The major targets of the Great Terror were communists. Over half of the people who were arrested were members of the party at the time of their arrest. The armed forces, the Communist Party, and the government in general were purged of all allegedly dissident persons; the victims were generally sentenced to death or to long terms of hard labor. Much of the purge was carried out in secret, and only a few cases were tried in public 'show trials'. By the time the terror subsided in 1939, Stalin had managed to bring both the party and the public to a state of complete submission to his rule. Soviet society was so atomized and the people so fearful of reprisals that mass arrests were no longer necessary. Stalin ruled as absolute dictator of the Soviet Union until his death in March 1953.

## **9 Campaign against 'cosmopolitans'**

The campaign against 'cosmopolitans', i.e. Jews, was initiated in articles in the central organs of the Communist Party in 1949. The campaign was directed primarily at the Jewish intelligentsia and it was the first public attack on Soviet Jews as Jews. 'Cosmopolitans' writers were accused of hating the Russian people, of supporting Zionism, etc. Many Yiddish writers as well as the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were arrested in November 1948 on charges that they maintained ties with Zionism and with American 'imperialism'. They were executed secretly in 1952. The antisemitic Doctors' Plot was launched in January 1953. A wave of anti-Semitism spread through the USSR. Jews were removed from their positions, and rumors of an imminent mass deportation of Jews to the eastern part of the USSR began to spread. Stalin's death in March 1953 put an end to the campaign against 'cosmopolitans'.

## **10 Erenburg, Ilya Grigorievich (1891-1967)**

Famous Russian Jewish novelist, poet and journalist who spent his early years in France. His first important novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurento* (1922) is a satire on modern European civilization. His other novels include *The Thaw* (1955), a forthright piece about Stalin's régime which gave its name to the period of relaxation of censorship after Stalin's death.

## **11 Babi Yar**

Babi Yar is the site of the first mass shooting of Jews that was carried out openly by fascists. On 29th and 30th September 1941 33,771 Jews were shot there by a special SS unit and Ukrainian militia men. During the Nazi occupation of Kiev between 1941 and 1943 over a 100,000 people were killed in Babi Yar, most of whom were Jewish. The Germans tried in vain to efface the traces of the mass grave in August 1943 and the Soviet public learnt about mass murder after World War II.

## **12 Doctors' Plot**

The Doctors' Plot was an alleged conspiracy of a group of Moscow doctors to murder leading government and party officials. In January 1953, the Soviet press reported that nine doctors, six of whom were Jewish, had been arrested and confessed their guilt. As Stalin died in March 1953, the trial never took place. The official paper of the party, the *Pravda*, later announced that the charges against the doctors were false and their confessions obtained by torture. This case was one of the

worst anti-Semitic incidents during Stalin's reign. In his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956 Khrushchev stated that Stalin wanted to use the Plot to purge the top Soviet leadership.

### **13 Transnistria**

Area between the Dnestr and Bug Rivers and the Black Sea. The word Transnistria derived from the Romanian name of the Dnestr River - Nistru. The territory was controlled by Gheorghe Alexianu, governor appointed by Ion Antonescu. Several labor camps were established on this territory, onto which Romanian Jews were deported from Bessarabia and Bukovina in 1941-1942. The most feared camps were Vapniarka, Ribnita, Berezovka, Tulcin and Iampol. Most of the Jews died between 1941-1943 because of horrible living conditions, diseases, and lack of food.

### **14 Twentieth Party Congress**

At the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956 Khrushchev publicly debunked the cult of Stalin and lifted the veil of secrecy from what had happened in the USSR during Stalin's leadership.

### **15 Khrushchev, Nikita (1894-1971)**

Soviet communist leader. After Stalin's death in 1953, he became first secretary of the Central Committee, in effect the head of the Communist Party of the USSR. In 1956, during the 20th Party Congress, Khrushchev took an unprecedented step and denounced Stalin and his methods. He was deposed as premier and party head in October 1964. In 1966 he was dropped from the Party's Central Committee.

### **16 Civil War (1918-1920)**

The Civil War between the Reds (the Bolsheviks) and the Whites (the anti-Bolsheviks), which broke out in early 1918, ravaged Russia until 1920. The Whites represented all shades of anti-communist groups - Russian army units from World War I, led by anti-Bolshevik officers, by anti-Bolshevik volunteers and some Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. Several of their leaders favored setting up a military dictatorship, but few were outspoken tsarists. Atrocities were committed throughout the Civil War by both sides. The Civil War ended with Bolshevik military victory, thanks to the lack of cooperation among the various White commanders and to the reorganization of the Red forces after Trotsky became commissar for war. It was won, however, only at the price of immense sacrifice; by 1920 Russia was ruined and devastated. In 1920 industrial production was reduced to 14% and agriculture to 50% as compared to 1913.